

February 8, 2023

Good morning, thank you for having me here today, and for taking time to listen to what I have to share. My name is Ashley Fioretti, and I live in Middletown Springs, Vermont where I am the owner / operator of Little Flower Farm, which is a small diversified farm raising eggs, produce, and making maple syrup. I also have the pleasure of teaching at both the Middletown Springs Elementary School and Wells Village School, and I am part of the WellsSprings District Farm to School team, as we were fortunate to receive a VAAFMTSE grant last year.

I ask that you please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with a level funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2024, and that you also support the Local Purchasing Incentive program for schools at \$500,000 in base funding.

These programs are super important to me, not only because my children attend Vermont schools, but because food (everything from eating it to growing it) and food education are passions of mine, and have been since I was a teenager. Food is life, and for students to be able to experience local foods in a tangible manner is invaluable. The ability to grow food that is served in our local school is one of the most fulfilling aspects of my life as a farmer. Without these programs it would be much harder for this type of education and nutrition to take place within our local schools, and for local farms to have such a strong connection with the local school community.

Through our Farm to School Grant, I am able to continue the work of keeping our school garden and the educational experiences for students through that happening. The pure joy and excitement that I have witnessed through watching students get their hands in the soil to plant seeds and transplant starts, harvest food that they grew from those seeds and starts, and then

to consume it in the cafeteria is so special. For students that don't have the opportunity to grow food at their homes, or have not been exposed to growing food before, this experience is truly life-changing. I have been able to witness students making the connection between where their food comes from and how it grows to feeding themselves and others.

Through our Farm to School Grant I am also able to go into both the Middletown Springs Elementary School and Wells Village School once a month to interact with every grade from Pre-K to 6th to have an experience with one locally grown food crop each month utilizing the Harvest of the Month resource, and the mobile kitchens our grant money helped us assemble. It is so nice to be able to connect with local farmers if I haven't grown the food for the month, and be able to share with students that this food we are about to explore using all five senses was grown right here in our state, and usually right down the road from one of the two schools.

I enjoy connecting these food items to their mathematics classes, English curriculum, literature, social studies, science, and art and music classes because it's nice for students to be exposed to food beyond what they see on their plates. I love traveling the globe with students so that they can go beyond the local and national food connections to other people around the world that are from the country where the food originated, responsible for that food being here in Vermont, or are also consuming that food so that students are able to see how food connects us all.

Cooking with students is also a wonderful experience because they all have fun doing so, and are learning a life skill. There are really no words to describe how awesome it feels when children try a new food for the first time, even if they don't like it, the bravery of trying something new because of the pride they feel in preparing the food is a truly special experience to be a part of. The bonus experience is when students ask for the recipe at the end of the class, or their parents approach me to let me know they enjoyed recreating that recipe together with their family. It's not everyday that you get to hear that about kale chips.

In my humble opinion, helping students understand that food doesn't just appear in a grocery store, learning how to grow, harvest, and store food, learning how to prepare fresh and unprocessed food and why and how those particular foods are good for our bodies, connecting students especially to their local community and beyond to the global community, is such an important and vital part of the learning that takes place in our schools. I am grateful that our school was able to receive a Farm to School grant, and I hope that this program is funded so that it can continue throughout our state.

Finally, we are lucky enough to be a school that still prepares food for the cafeteria in house, and the ability of the school nutrition person to be able to purchase local foods, especially as a parent, makes me feel great about my child eating school lunch. Without these initiatives it would be so much more difficult for our nutrition staff to procure local foods that they are then able to implement into both existing and new menu items for students to explore. We are lucky that our cook feeds our students such nutritious meals utilizing locally sourced ingredients, sometimes in a more non-traditional preparation, which in turn helps students be more adventurous when dining.

Once again, I ask that you please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with a level funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2024, and that you also support the Local Purchasing Incentive program for schools at \$500,000 in base funding to allow all these programs and opportunities to continue to happen for our students in the upcoming year.

I appreciate you taking time to listen to what I have had to say. I'm happy to answer any questions at this time. Thank you.